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The Contribution of David Burr

Kevin J. Madigan

- ¹ I would like to discuss David Burr's work¹ on Olivi's biblical exegesis in relation to three sets of dual terms or antinomies that, either implicitly or explicitly, often shape scholarship on the history of interpretation: traditionality and novelty; spiritualizing and historicizing; and orthodox and heterodox. One valuable and important way in which Burr has pushed the history of exegesis field forward, I want to suggest, is by applying *both* terms in these antinomies to Olivi's commentarial works, which, in the Middle Ages and in the twentieth century, have perhaps been too often understood, by friend and foe, exclusively, or in relation to *one or the other* of these opposed categories.

I. Traditionality and Novelty

- ² David Burr's scholarship on the history of exegesis has not only shed light on Olivi's use and interpretation of the Bible, as well as his exegetical influence, though it surely has done that. It has done so, importantly, against the background of the high-medieval interpretation of the book under consideration. For three reasons, this has been a great gain for scholarship. First of all, in addition to throwing light on Olivi, Burr has also taught us a great deal about how a particular book of the Bible, above all the Apocalypse, was interpreted in Olivi's own day and by patristic and medieval predecessors. Second, Burr has, in sketching this background, also established the only context in which Olivi's putative novelty or heterodoxy could be assessed. Third, Burr's mastery of the exegesis of a particular book in the high-medieval period has also allowed him to avert twin temptations that many scholars in the history of exegesis find difficult to resist: first, in an attempt to justify a particular study, implying that our subject is entirely novel and thus worthy of a reader's attention; and, second, suggesting that other contemporary exegetes may be understood as a part of a gray, monolithic, unimaginative group against which the dazzling brilliance of one's own subject can be measured and magnified. Happily, in his analyses of Olivi's apocalypse commentary, especially but not only in *OPK*

(on which I will focus my remarks here), Burr is very careful to give appropriate weight to each of these dimensions of Olivi's exegesis.

- 3 In Burr's hands, consequently, Olivi comes off as an original and inventive exegete, as indeed he was. At the same time, Burr highlights the extent to which Olivi was in conformity with, and deeply indebted to, the thirteenth century tradition. Burr has reminded us that, while at Paris, Olivi was presented with a way of reading the Bible, much as he was presented a way of reading the *Sentences* (see, e.g., *OPK*, xi). Having laboriously examined fifteen or so contemporary Apocalypse commentaries, Burr is able to show that there was a mendicant approach to the Apocalypse in the high Middle Ages, if hardly a monolithic one. Olivi accepted several fundamental assumptions that, in Burr's mind, place him squarely within the main line of thirteenth century exegesis of the Apocalypse (see, e.g., *OPK*, 75). While focusing on Olivi's novelty, then, Burr never loses sight of his traditionality, and he has thus taught us an awful lot both about the broad interpretation of a particular book, as well as Olivi's particular construction of it.
- 4 Let me just observe incidentally that this capacity to put Olivi fruitfully into context is a scholarly habit of David's that has borne great fruit. David's *Persecution*, for example, was richly informative about Olivi's vicissitudes, as well as Olivi's often unique views on marriage, poverty, philosophy, the Immaculate Conception, eucharist, and other issues. But Burr again was able to tell us what was unique about Olivi only by first discovering and then describing widely-accepted views on these matters. Thus, the ways in which David has pushed forward the field of biblical exegesis are comparable to the ways in which he has pushed forward scholarship on Olivi and the field of medieval studies in general.

II. Spiritualizing and Historicizing Exegesis

- 5 Closely related to the topic of Olivi's originality or traditionality is the issue of how he is to be placed on the spectrum of description that is defined by the two poles of spiritualizing and historicizing exegesis. Burr is surely right to emphasize that Olivi's exegesis is (to use my language) probably the most highly historicized in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. Maintaining that many of Olivi's biblical commentaries are rich in apocalyptic speculation, Burr has also suggested, rightly I think, that most of the elements later attacked in the Apocalypse commentary were already present in the earlier commentaries (see, e.g., *OFF*, 178; and *OPK*, 66).
- 6 He has proven, in addition, that the historicizing and especially apocalyptic elements of Olivi's commentaries—including both his early commentaries and the late Apocalypse commentary—are highly, probably uniquely, indebted to the thought of Joachim of Fiore (see, e.g., *OPK*, 78-82, 105-107 and 118-120). In some ways, as you know, this is a controversial position, if only because several influential and distinguished scholars have held an opposing position, namely, that, for Olivi, Joachim was simply one more authority, one toward whom Olivi was only moderately indebted and towards whose thought he was selective, ambivalent and critical (see, e.g., *OPK*, 79).
- 7 Burr has convincingly proven that this is not quite right and that, indeed, as he has put it, Olivi was "profoundly Joachite" (*OPK*, 82). Since Randy Daniels plans to talk at length about this aspect of David's analysis of Olivi, I will say little more about it except to note that, again, because he immersed himself in high-medieval commentaries on the Apocalypse, Burr is able to show that Olivi was more or less alone among his contemporaries in his attitude toward Joachim. Unlike his fellow mendicants, Olivi

regarded Joachim not just as one more authority but a prophet (OPK, 80) to whom the secrets of scripture had been revealed, and Burr is able to demonstrate very clearly how this attitude was reflected in his exegesis. Even those commentators who do use Joachim, Burr has demonstrated, use many other commentators and authorities (unlike Olivi, who seemed only to have Joachim and Richard of St. Victor, as well as the text of the Apocalypse, before him). Thus, what some Italian scholars stated about Olivi may in fact be safely asserted of *them*, namely that they could accommodate only a limited and ambivalent acceptance of Joachim. None, for example, could accept his partitioning of salvation history into three *status*. And none made quite the extensive use Olivi did of Joachim's 3- and 7-fold patterns, fewer still of the Joachite notion of *Concordia*. (See the important discussion in, e.g., OPK, 80 and 104-107.) Given all of this, Burr's work on Olivi's historicizing exegesis seems to me an important and convincingly revisionist chapter in the history of (to coin a phrase) prophecy in the later Middle Ages.

III. Orthodox or Heterodox?

- 8 Also closely related to, but clearly distinguished from, the issue of traditionality and originality is the question, was Olivi's exegesis orthodox or heterodox? In a sense, David has concluded that the answer was that he was both, though he is very careful to distinguish the sense in which Olivi was, so to speak, "objectively" heterodox and the sense in which he was conditionally heterodox or heretical, given the ecclesiastical conditions in which he was posthumously judged.
- 9 Once again, David has had to overcome a traditional, and he believes, mistaken view of Olivi's orthodoxy and heterodoxy. After all, several scholars have argued that the various judges of Olivi's Apocalypse commentary condemned it because they misunderstood it, read it out of context, focused on marginal matters or failed to appreciate the spirit in which Olivi was read (see, e.g., OPK, 234-235). Burr argues, I think convincingly, that, on the contrary, Olivi's examiners generally understood Olivi and were reacting to genuine differences. None felt the church would progress in such a way as to change the nature of human knowledge or ecclesiastical structures. While they had faith that the papacy would help to preserve the gospel, Olivi was persuaded that, by assaulting the Franciscan Rule in the near future, it would betray the gospel. To them, Francis was one more saint whose sanctity depended on the approval of the pope. Olivi thought of Francis of the angel of the sixth seal, the herald of a new age, whose authority resided in his embodying with his followers the life of Christ and his apostles. (See good summary in OPK, 235-236.) "These are not," Burr concludes, "minor differences," and thus it is not surprising, or even particularly unfair, that John XXII's theological advisers repudiated them and their author (OPK, 236).
- 10 At the same time, David gives appropriate weight to the contextual or conditional circumstances that resulted in the condemnation of Olivi's commentaries (not only on the Apocalypse, but on the Matthew commentary as well as others, perhaps). First, the attack on Olivi's apocalypse commentary was obviously connected to the general assault by John XXII on Franciscan poverty. Second, it was also connected to Olivi having become the leader of a group of *sectatores*, a diabolical group, so it was perceived, over whom Olivi had powerful, even subversive, posthumous influence. Thus it appears that he was judged unorthodox also because of the conditions under which he was judged and because of the ways in which his views were being appropriated and manipulated. In addition, David has observed that Olivi's own rhetoric protected him, or should have protected him, from facile charges of heterodoxy. Olivi's language is loaded with careful qualifiers like *fere*,

quasi, videatur. These were important words for Olivi, and to the extent that they were ignored or muted by his judges, to *that* extent, perhaps, David seems to suggest, they misunderstand his exegesis and therefore misjudged him.

- 11 Let me note before concluding that, in discussing the issue of Olivi's heterodoxy, David also at several points in his career made an important point about genre. At several points, he reminds us that it was not dangerous to describe Francis, as Bonaventure had, as angel of the sixth seal in the *Legenda Maior* or in the *Collationes in Hexaemeron*. As one of the examining theologians observed in an Olivi process, it is one thing to offer a pious, devotional, sermonic reading of the passage. It is another to proclaim in a commentary on the Bible, an exegetical work, that such an assertion is the literal meaning of the text in question (OPK, 236). One reason Olivi was stigmatized for heterodoxy was that he dared to express such opinions in an academic biblical commentary. That, as David has reminded us, fell within the purview of theologians to judge on its scholarly merits and its consistency with what we might call the normative exegetical tradition (OPK, 236). There were, from the point of view of his examiners, "objective" grounds for finding it subversive and out of step with that tradition. And these grounds were not just substantive but generic as well. That is, they had to do not only with what Olivi said. They had to do with how and, more precisely in what genre he said it. Perhaps one way—though it is of course only one way—of understanding the differences between Bonaventure and Olivi is that Bonaventure does not, by and large, seem to express his apocalyptic convictions in his commentaries on Luke or John. Olivi does. And as his judges noted, he expressed such ideas not only in his Apocalypse commentary but in his other biblical commentaries as well. Indeed, as one of his judges noted, he could be certain that Olivi was heretical because, as he acutely and accurately observed, Olivi had been saying the same sorts of erroneous things throughout his career in many of his exegetical works (OPK, Chaps. IX-X). One way of understanding Olivi's fate, David seems to imply, is that he disregarded the generic conventions of biblical commentary established, or at least honored, by contemporary masters and teachers such as Bonaventure.

Conclusion

- 12 Much more could be said, as I draw to my conclusion here, about the rich ways in which David has contributed to our understanding of thirteenth-century biblical exegesis. I have, for example, said almost nothing about the reception and use of Olivi's exegesis, a topic on which David has written very interestingly. But it seems to me, again, that he has very subtly honored the ways in which Olivi was both traditional *and* novel, spiritualizing *and* Joachite, orthodox *and* heterodox. And he has done so with other scholarly and personal qualities that are as hard to achieve in scholarship on the history of exegesis as they are easy to admire and celebrate. David, after all, has written with great stylistic grace, with wit and with modesty—three qualities that don't spring to mind when I think of the otherwise honorable Peter of John. His scholarship has been, if you'll forgive the Franciscan lyrics, as I know you will, enlightening and exemplary to his grateful readers. It might be going too far, and it might embarrass David, were we to claim that he has literally been an angel of illumination or to observe that his body of work bears the stigmata of divine favor. Yet the fact remains that scholars who work in the field of exegesis look on David in the same way Olivi looked on Joachim. He is not simply one more scholar. He is a scholar who achieved profound insights into the mysteries of his subject, one whose writing has deeply and permanently shaped the field. For that, I'm sure we all say, *tibi gratias agimus, Davide*.

NOTES

1. Abbreviations used in this essay (citations will be made using abbreviations and page numbers):

OFF: David Burr, *Olivi and Franciscan Poverty. The Origins of the Usus Pauper Controversy*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989.

OPK: David Burr, *Olivi's Peaceable Kingdom. A Reading of the Apocalypse Commentary*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.

Persecution: David Burr, *The Persecution of Peter Olivi*, Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society, 1976 ("Transactions of the American Philosophical Society," n.s., 66 [5]).

There are aspects of this essay which reflect its original oral presentation in Kalamazoo, 2003, not all of which I have changed.

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